

HOLY TERROR

June 19, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 6:1-8

Mark 4:35-41

"And he...rebuked the wind...and there was a great calm...And they were filled with awe."

-Mark:39 (RSV)

That story makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Part of the reason is that I've been on a sailboat, and know a little bit, at least, about the absolute vulnerability of human beings in a boat on a large body of water when a storm blows up. We were moored in a harbor in fact when the worst of it happened. A real "Nor-easter" roared through in the early morning. Even though we were relatively safe, it taught me a lot about the raw power of a storm at sea and about my own fear. So I was interested to learn that the Sea of Galilee lies 600 feet below sea level and the mountains surrounding it act as a geological funnel for the prevailing winds of the Mediterranean Sea (a little like what happens at the corner of Michigan and Walton with a brisk wind off the lake funneled down the street between the buildings). Sudden violent wind squalls were not uncommon. They were part of the risk of fishing there. They were dangerous.

It is very frightening to be caught in a squal. But there are things you can do to enhance your chances. You can use a little bit of sail - unless it is torn off the mast, and the rudder - unless it is broken off, to keep the boat pointed into the wind so that it presents a smaller target for waves. In a storm, that is hard work. You must assign some on board to bail - because the waves are going to break over the bow and a fishing boat will fill and sink.

So there they were, a storm has blown up. The boat is being tossed about like a cork. Jesus is sleeping. That's the most difficult thing for me to believe in the story. If there's a miracle here, it's a man sleeping through a storm in an open fishing boat. The disciples are afraid, and with good reason. They awaken Jesus. He speaks to the storm and it goes away. I love the way Mark tells these stories with economy and leanness. The disciples should have been relieved, joyful, ecstatic. Instead they were afraid - really afraid; now afraid in a much more profound way than they were before. The Revised Standard Version translates it, "filled with awe." That's not quite it. A literal translation of the Greek would be "they feared with a great fear." You bet they did. They were afraid in the storm. But in the presence of a power

with authority over the storm they were really afraid. Holy terror is what they experienced. And it is what this story is about.

It happens a lot in the Bible. Something supernatural occurs and people respond in fear. Moses on Mt. Sinai, with lightening and thunder "...and the people are afraid and tremble." [Exodus 20:18] Shepherds are in the field outside Bethlehem; an angel appears and they are "filled with fear"; the Risen Christ appears to his disciples and says "fear not." The prototype passage is from the prophet Isaiah, our first lesson this morning. The prophet was in the temple and in an experience which became his summons to ministry. He felt the earth shake, heard voices and felt a burning coal on his lips... and his reaction? "Woe is me! For I am lost." I can understand that. It is disturbing, disquieting, frightening to be in the presence of the supernatural.

It is also fascinating. We live in a time and a culture, characterized by rationality, reasonability. Ancient men and women lived in constant terror of the unknown. We live in a time when knowledge has banished superstition and fear, or at least is supposed to. There are no things that go "bump in the night" other than creatures of our own imaginations. When the windows blew out in the Sears Tower the insurance companies refused to pay because it was "an act of God," but no one takes that as a serious theological assertion. We know the atmospheric conditions which caused that to happen. We know about cause and effect. We know what is possible and what is impossible. And yet, all the while we keep looking over our shoulders, fascinated, a little frightened perhaps, but always interested. We had reason recently to acknowledge that many of us, in many stations in life, from the most humble to the most exalted, consult the astrological charts. Certainly Hollywood knows that we love to be scared to death.

The occult continues to be big business. One of the most successful missionary movements in this century has been the effective proselytizing of American and European Christians by a collection of other-worldly swamis and gurus from the Far East representing a kind of mystical piety that mainline Protestantism intentionally left behind decades ago. In his recent major work on comparative religion, Hans Kung says human beings need, want and look for experiences of the holy...and when Western religion forgot that people turned to the East. John Updike's new novel, S, is about a middle-aged, upper middle class, suburban woman who leaves the banality of her neat life in New England for a Hindu commune in Arizona.

We have tried so hard to be rational, reasonable and intellectually respectable that we have overdone it and actually become more rational even than the scientists. We are so afraid of what Leonard Sweet, President of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, calls "Peter Pan-Fairy Tale Religion" that we have excised all mystery and any sense of the holy from our faith. We are so appalled by the phony faith healers that we are embarrassed even to talk about a power that can heal. We need nothing so much as a "reconstituted supernaturalism." [See Liberal Protestantism, p. 257ff]

In point of fact, science doesn't know it all and the scientists are the first to admit it. It's you and I - scientific lay people - who are

inclined to over invest our confidence in science as a panacea for all our ills. You and I will hustle on down to Walgreen's and buy a tube of tooth paste because an actor in a white coat with a three-ring binder in his hand looks out from our TV screen and intoned with great earnestness says, "Laboratory tests prove..."

Scientists say that we have only begun to scratch the surface of the unknown. There is far more that remains unexplained and mysterious than we lay people can imagine. Jacob Bronowski reminded us that "There is today almost no scientific theory which was held in the 18th century." In fact, in the major scientific arenas - cosmology, quantum mechanics, genetics - little that was held just 50 years ago as the whole truth is still in place. [Ibid., Sweet]

No one ever brought more intellect to his religion than the philosopher Pascal. He concluded, "If one subjects everything to reason our religion will lose its mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principles of reason, our religion will become absurd and ridiculous. There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in." [See Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy, Preface]

Our Presbyterian religion is reasonable, but it is not only reasonable. One of the classic texts every student of theology has to read is The Idea of the Holy, by Rudolf Otto. Otto taught that one of the common human experiences is awe in the presence of that which is more than human. He called it the "Mysterium Tremendum" and described almost poetically -

"The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden eruption from the depths of the soul... It may become the hushed trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of - whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."

[Ibid., p. 12,13]

The trouble is that life used to introduce us to that dimension of existence - but for many of us, at least, no longer does. Living in the city ours is removed from the primal power of nature ordinarily. We read about the draught - but we surely experience the kind of existential dread and human powerlessness far less urgently than the farmers 50 miles west of here.

Human beings meet the mysterious at the limits of life, on the edges, at birth, and death, in ecstasy and in passion. Our way of life, in the name of progress, has insulated us. Birth and death used to happen naturally, at home, in full view of the whole family and community. I'm very grateful every time I'm in a hospital that I'm alive in 1988. I don't wish to romanticize the medicine of the past. I'm very grateful for the life-giving miracles that are common place every time I visit the premature

infant's nursery and see a whole roomful of miracles: alive babies who not long ago would not be alive. But the price for this progress is that we are insulated from the limits of life and therefore from a healthy sense of mystery and the holy.

Death and birth happen in antiseptic isolation. One of my very favorite theological observations is by Langdon Gilkey who wrote "Any person who has witnessed the birth of a child has experienced the wonder, terror and ultimacy of that event... it is almost unavailable to modern men." [Naming the Whirlwind, p. 318] Happily that's changing and that is why his observation is a favorite of mine. My own fatherhood began in the time when expectant fathers were a hospital nuisance of the first magnitude, relegated to a tiny torture chamber called a waiting room - full of cigarette smoke, a plastic plant, three-year-old issues of Field and Stream, and a pay phone on the wall - while the most mysterious, holiest event in history is happening down the hall. Happily that is different now and men are able to be in the presence of the holy mystery of human birth.

So with dying. We are learning to be human again: learning that there is a time to put limits on medical technology and the necessities of the Intensive Care Unit and allow humans to touch and human love to be expressed. Too often dying happens alone, apart, in antiseptic isolation.

You cannot witness the extremes - birthing or dying - without an ancient, almost primal experience of awe, the mystery of the holy, the holy fear in the presence of that which is unexplainable.

If religion doesn't remember that, you can count on art to celebrate it. That's what art is about actually, the expression of that which is not capable of being expressed in simple sentences or diagrams or formulas. A New York Times article about Eugene O'Neill on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, concluded that the continuing power of O'Neill is that his plays explore the limits of human existence and meaning. O'Neill was a Roman Catholic and once said about his work: "Most modern plays are concerned with the relations between man and man. That doesn't interest me at all. I am only interested in the relations of man and God." [New York Times, 6/12/88] And Archibald MacLeish, "Once the maps have all been made, a man were better dead than find new continents." [Sweet, op. cit., p. 260] In Peter Schaefer's Amadeus, Salieri calls the piercing entry of the oboe in a Mozart Sonata, the voice of God... And who can walk through the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit without sensing a woman's striving and struggling to put on canvas the mystery of existence, the holiness of the creation?

Religion needs to remember that. Religion is about that which cannot always be reduced to simple, understandable propositions. It was Reinhold Niebuhr who pointed out that religion is cheapened and vulgarized when it banishes all mystery. I think one of the greatest theological insights, and one of the most relevant, was Niebuhr's sense that the cause of religion is not helped by those religionists who "claim to know too much about the mysteries of life." With a twinkle in his eye he lamented those who "know the geography of heaven and hell, the furniture of the one and the temperature of the other." [Mystery and Meaning, The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 237]

Niebuhr taught that what has made Christianity vulnerable to rationalism is not its sense of mystery but its presumptuousness. Medieval Christianity left no mystery unresolved, no question unanswered. The same mistake of trying to know it all is made by contemporary fundamentalism, the popular evangelical certainty which the televangelists have made so enormously successful.

I don't want religion to answer all my questions. I don't want to be so friendly and warm with my faith that I forget that I came here to be in touch with the Lord of the Universe. Popular piety is not at all comfortable with a God big enough to inspire awe. We love the thought of God walking in the garden with us, talking with, telling us we are his own. But the Bible describes a God who is the High and Holy One who is sovereign Lord of all nations. The Israelites were afraid to pronounce God's name. We've been heard to call God the "Man Upstairs." I don't want to make us too cozy with the Almighty. I want a religion which reminds me of mystery and encourages me to be honest in the face of that which I don't understand, but before which I can bow down in worship and praise.

Perhaps you know the wonderful children's writer Shel Silverstein, author of The Giving Tree. He has a book of children's poems entitled Where the Sidewalk Ends. Where the sidewalk ends, i.e. where the concrete or "con'crete" stops is where

"grass grows soft and white
and the sun burns crimson bright,
and the moonbird rests from his flight
To cool in the peppermint wind."

Silverstein knows that children and adults become fully human when their imaginations are free, when they leave behind that which can be only understood and explained and counted and measured.

The first poem in the book is called Invitation -
"If you are a dreamer, come in,
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer...
If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.
Come in!
Come in!"

[suggested by Sweet, op. cit., p. 257]

Hear that as an invitation to a religious faith which is open to the mystery and holiness of it all... A religious faith that incorporates the unknown and is comfortable not knowing all the answers. Our religion begins there - in the presence of that which is other, holy, mysterious. But it does not come to rest there. Rather this religion focuses on the life of a man; one in whom we are invited to place our confidence; one who prevails over storms; one who shows us the reality of God and the reality of ourselves in the middle of the storm and in the midst of our fear.

In the face of mystery, this religion is bold to proclaim one who is Lord and friend, savior and guide. This religion proclaims not the answer

to all of life's mysteries and dilemmas, but quite simply that when you are in a boat in the middle of a storm and very afraid, you can count on his being in the boat with you. This religion is about that finally - that out of all the mysteries of life including that ultimate mystery - our own death, there is one upon whom we can rely ultimately and from whom nothing will ever separate us - not storms, not sickness, suffering, persecution, not even our own death.

This religion proclaims, not answers to all questions - but a Lord who loves us with God's own love - a Lord who deals with the final mystery of human death, that final and ultimate fear - by being in the boat with us, by dying with us and for us.

They were afraid in that tiny boat, tossed about on the sea. They were afraid when they realized they were in the presence of the holy, the presence of the one who has authority over all the powers of creation.

And one day they were even more afraid - filled utterly - with awe.

It was that day when all the unexplainable, holy mystery of God was seen in terrible and beautiful clarity.

It was the day about which the spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?..." and answers - for them, for us, for the ages - "Sometimes it causes me to tremble."

Come to us out of the unknown, O Lord. Give us hearts brave enough to acknowledge mystery...

And faith stout enough to bow before the holy...

Come to us - in all our fears. Calm the storm. Speak your word of peace to us. Amen.